

DHANRAM SINGH

Don't assume everyone with a name ending as Singh is a Punjabi. Dhanram Singh is not a Punjabi; he calls himself a Nepali; Nepalis also sport such a secondary name – but Dhanram Singh is actually a Tibetan. Let me tell you right away that in North India a Nepali commands a little more social acceptance than a Tibetan. Nepalis have distinct physical features and exhibit a martial streak. Tibetans too are distinguished by fair complexion and small, narrow eyes and less than ample growth of hair on face and body. Still, Nepalis and Tibetans are entirely different from one another.

Ask any Gurkha who works as a guard and he will admit he's a Nepali – and that hurts the sentiments of many Nepalis. They are not even willing to acknowledge a word like *Kancha* in a Maruti car advertisement. If you grill him Dhanram Singh would tell you he's a Tibetan; he can't pronounce the word Tibet. Who knows? Maybe both the words are interchangeable in his native village.

It was in Bombay that I had my first contact with Gurkhas. Mahendra Singh was a Gurkha and a former employee in a factory with forty workers; he's a real Nepali and scared others off their wits; he would appear with a Sam Manekshaw hat, socks and shoes, khaki half pant, a full-arm shirt and a curved dagger hanging from his belt. When Mahendra Singh left the factory on getting a better offer elsewhere, Dhanram Singh took over his position. But for his uniform and hat there's no reason why Dhanram should command the respect of others. I always wondered why I have never met a Gurkha with a mustache.

Normally, Gurkhas are not good at conversational Hindi. Spoken Hindi is marked by the regional influence; Hindi, as spoken by the South Indians, Bengalis, Gujaratis, Punjabis, varies from state to state and so does Hindi spoken by the Biharies and people from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. It is obvious Tibetans too have their own distinct version of Hindi.

Still, the influence of Hindi on Gurkhas appears minor because they employ only minimum Hindi words in their conversation. The word *Sahib* is usually used for a supervisor and is pronounced as *Sap*; the Gurkha would say it as *Shap*, I would like to quote another example, but space limitation doesn't allow going into more detail; interested readers are urged to watch the Malayalam movie starring Mohanlal as a Gurkha.

Dhanram was anything but flamboyant; he conveyed neither a body language nor cast any threatening looks. Many of his coworkers tried to get intimate with him and claim him as one of their own; naturally, this didn't sit well with the authorities who discouraged any such prospect. But no threats or warnings would ever change Dhanram's manner; even under repeated verbal assaults, he would remain stoic and laugh like a simpleton.

Dhanram had a family back home – a daughter and two sons. He was the most unlucky person; he visited his folks every two years.

The Gurkhas travel in groups of fifteen or twenty; the first leg of the trip starts in *Bombay* and ends in *Varanasi*; later, they change into another train that takes them through *Patna*, *Baruni*, finally switch to another train on meter gauge to *Silguri*. Thus begins a journey in an old, rickety bus through a mountainous route via *Mangal* to the border of *Sikkim*; a distance of fifty kilometers takes four hours to cross. Then follows a trek through precipitous roads lasting eight to ten days with the men carrying loads on their heads and horses; the trip along the hilly region usually starts at eight in the morning and ends at four in the afternoon followed by rest in some village on the way. Every year the Gurkhas travel by a familiar route exposed to the onslaught from extremely cold weather, falling boulders and snow storms. Think about it; we can hardly endure a journey from *Pollacchi* to *Udumulpet*!

There're no railway reservations; the Gurkhas would scramble for seats in the general coach at the railway crossings, each one carrying single, home-made bread for the journey; the next loaf of bread would be prepared when they are awaiting the next train. During the trek through the hills, the bread kneaded at nights will serve as the food for the next day.

Their colorful trunks will contain collections over the two years, such as garments and silver ornaments. Indian currency wouldn't be acceptable in their country; still they would be able to use unofficial sources in small cities to obtain the necessary foreign exchange. Money transactions and letters to home are always handled through the groups bound for home.

Gurkhas are not necessarily watchmen. Their duty lasts the whole day, all the seven days of a week. The men lived in a cage-like enclosure built exclusively for them at the rear end of the factory. They were loath to take short vacations; even sickness would pose no problem if one could just manage to get up and sit. Thanks to the generosity of the authorities Dhanram Singh could consolidate his vacation over a two-year period. When he goes on vacation he would make some temporary arrangements at the work place. Half the vacation would be spent up in travel up

and down, so his marital bliss back home would last just a month. You might have forgotten all about Dhanram when, one day, he suddenly shows up with a smile and salutes you.

You would never guess when the change of guard had taken place.

After his normal working hours, when the staff and managers left at the close of business, another world would open up to Dhanram Singh.

The factory operated only a single shift; the factory supervisor would show up only in the morning. There were three supervisors and the administration and stores department were also under their control. A Tamilian worker was highly valued as cooperative and hard working, so he enjoyed some freedom and privileges. Thus Dhanram Singh became a crew member who toiled, every day, from nine to five-forty-five, spent two hours daily traveling by train to and from work, subsisted on whatever he could get to eat and got ready to catch the train for work the next day; his life went on as a machine that never rusted.

The workers reported for work at five thirty in the morning and, after a wash and donning the uniform, they await the calling bell. I was the man entrusted with the keys to the main store, administration office and the store room, so I would report for work in a leisurely manner. On a few occasions I would even hate the idea of going home; some days I would report late for work to avoid the congestion in train. And there were nights when I would stay back at the factory.

I have put away a bright blanket and a towel in my office drawer, in case; all I needed to do was to wash my teeth the next morning.

The workers were grouped into four or five teams; a common canteen owned by one Dawood Musa from the neighboring village *Kannur Pakkam Kakkaadu* served their needs. Besides *Chai*, the owner supplied other items like *Dal-pav*, *Usal-pav*, *Dal-Chaval*, *Usal-chaval*, *Omlet*, *Bhattaata vada-pav*, and *rotti-sabji*. *Pav* is a kind of bread like a bun; *chaval* stands for rice, and *sabji* means curry or soup. You can pay on a monthly basis and have bread and *sabji* served at night by a formal request.

Dhanram Singh would ask me, "*Shap, ghar nai jaata?*"

His work begins in the evening when, after a wash, he kneads the dough. Around six-thirty, his colleagues would show up and the men would exchange banter. Two of the coworkers belonged to his team and lived with him.

There would be a constant supply of dough in an aluminum tin; and raw rice and the groceries bought from the Majjitbandar in ample supply – dal, salt, tamarind, mustard oil and a kerosene stove.

Once in a blue moon Dhanram Singh would get a letter from home. It would be addressed to my name, in English. Dhanram buys a bunch of envelopes, writes down his Bombay address and hands them to his folks when he goes home. Nobody knows who and in which part of India those letters were posted. Neither can we tell if the words scribbled in the letters belong to some Tibetan, Nepali, Chinese or any other regional language.

The letters received from home - once in a fortnight - would normally carry some sad and painful news. They come from some far off hilly place where the modern facilities of telephone and mail are nonexistent. Whether we are talking about the death of a parent, some female or siblings, the news would be conveyed by mail only. So, the news invariably comes late by two weeks and, if one wants to go home, he has to spend two more weeks in travel. Yet, the loss of a dear one becomes a fact of life.

Condolences are conveyed from each Gurkha to the folks in far off land through coworkers in weekly gatherings. The meetings take place on Sunday mornings in Chowpathy Beach. The men would convene under a tree shade, assemble in a circular fashion, recall with tears the memories of the departed, perform the rituals and consign the letters to a funeral pyre. The ashes are then collected and immersed in the Arabian Sea after the men shave their heads, take a purification bath and carry with them the individual memories of their departed relatives.

You will get to know what happened when Dhanram Singh shaves his head within a week of his receiving the news from home; he undertakes this ritual at least three or four times a year.

His coworkers would tease him when he appears with a shaven head. Can one laugh at someone's death? It is in their company and simple laughter that Dhanram would find solace and comfort even as the tragedy weighs heavily in his heart.

A *beedi* or tea in a cup and saucer would be enough to please Dhanram.

It's not just Dhanram; I have never seen a Gurkha with a stern face. They beam with a smile when facing another as if saying, "I share my joy with you."

There's a movie house on the way to the factory; I forgot its name. You pay only two rupees for admission and are allowed to sit anywhere without worrying about class or distinction. The fan above you would be always out of order and bed bugs would constantly keep nipping your

blood. Juice from *paan* would be scattered everywhere and you feel the constant stench in the air. On Saturdays the factory works on half-day shift and it was on one of those days that I watched the movie *Pyasaa*; Dhanram is fond of watching Shatrughan Sinha movies; he would ask me to lend him two rupees on every weekend. I was making only two hundred and ten rupees a month and, occasionally, I would end up borrowing ten rupees from my better-healed supervisor Sivaram Patekar.

On the seventh day of every month, soon after he gets his salary, Dhanram would settle his accounts with coworkers paying off two rupees to every one of them. I remember that once, when he had gone home, he brought a curved dagger with a hand-crafted handle; he told us he had bought it in a fair in Silguri; later, someone stole it from him.

Dhanram often talked about his village and a stream adjoining it, but I can't recall their names. His mind was constantly crowded with memories of his home, that stream and the wheat fields.

Eighteen years ago, when my life in Bombay was coming to an end, Dhanram Singh, who had just then returned after a summer vacation, brought along a twelve-year boy in a Gurkha uniform.

"*Hamara jawai Shap,*" he told me.

Was the boy his son? He donned a khaki uniform, hat, boots and a belt. I wondered if he could be a Tibetan young prince. It's an attractive face with a royal demeanor.

I asked Dhanram when he got his daughter married off.

It was during his summer vacation, he said.

It was around that time I had moved to Coimbatore. Later, I had gone to Bombay on business but had no opportunity to revisit that Bombay factory which had been, by then, closed down and converted to a godown. Still, I told myself that Dhanram Singh would always remain a Gurkha.

Has he retired from work – just like me, now? I am afraid Dhanram couldn't return home even if he tried. What about me? Could I go back?

Maybe he is strolling at night the streets of *Chembur*, *Govandi*, *Mankhurd*, *Sion*, *Matunga*, *Koliwada*, *Wadala*, and *Sivri* pounding pavements with a bamboo staff and letting out a long whistle, fully awake. Maybe he's earning five or ten rupees per the house he's guarding.

I very much want to meet with Dhanram even as I know, deep in my heart, that's impossible.

The world has since grown more generous. National borders are fast disappearing, and we hear that India's growth has increased by eight-fold.

Who knows? Maybe Dhanram Singh has now migrated to some Southern city or town and is prowling our streets with his bamboo staff and whistling in the dark. Should he ever appear in front of your home with a smile, dear generous readers, I would urge you, to make him a kind offer of five rupees.

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